

Music programs — The VSO respo

'An education without a significant musical component is no education at all,' the maestro says

BY BRAMWELL TOVEY

I am the music director and artistic head of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. I am also a parent of two students, aged nine and 11, enrolled in a Vancouver school board French immersion program. My wife, Lana, is a music educator with several years experience of inner-city school teaching in Winnipeg. For four years she volunteered as a teacher of music and choir for Queen Elizabeth Annex elementary school where she taught every class, as this VSB school had no provision for music.

The VSO performs to 50,000 students every year in our educational and other concerts for children.

The VSO Connects educational program works in partnership with school boards across the Lower Mainland. Our education work is supported by Telus, our premier education partner, the RBC Foundation and the Jemini Foundation. VSO Connects provides a link between the orchestra and selected schools on a year-to-year basis, bringing us into direct contact with thousands of students throughout the Lower Mainland. We have worked in harmonious partnership with the VSB and sincerely thank you for your tremendous support of this important program, which also brings band and orchestra students to VSO rehearsals at the Orpheum in downtown Vancouver.

One of the modules we present is a "Meet the Maestro" program. I have visited dozens of schools in this program as a guest speaker and performer, speaking to the whole school community, students, parents and the teachers — whose dedication and skill is so inspiring. I talk about music, the VSO, the language of music, the elements of composition and, of course, I play the piano. The highlight is usually a short movement by Beethoven whose music always connects with young listeners.

I make the point that Beethoven had a seemingly insurmountable handicap for a musician — he was deaf. He lived in a world of silence, yet understood the language of music better than any of his contemporaries. He created some of the most extraordinary music to have captivated hearts and minds during the last 200 years.

At the VSO we believe an education without a significant musical component is no education at all.

Music is a form of language which needs little or no translation. In a school district like Vancouver, where

dozens of languages are spoken by our widely diverse community, music is the only language common to all.

The proposal to cease investing in the band and strings program is one that the VSO strongly urges the VSB to withdraw. We have witnessed first hand the benefits of the VSB-supported band and strings program. The option of a user-pay or school-funded program does not embrace the inner-city child whose only connection with live music may be the saxophone or drum set that has been offered to them. The saving of half a million dollars is paltry when considering the life-enhancing benefits of this contact with the world of music. I doubt this amount would even buy a family home within 10 blocks of the illustrious VSB building on West Broadway. When I heard the actual figure, I found it hard to believe so much had been achieved with so little.

I do not tell you this while standing on a lofty esthetic perch. I grew up in the east end of London, England. My father died when I was a boy. Without the band and orchestra experience that I benefited from in the state school education [system], I would never have been able to compete and succeed in the music profession. As a single parent, my mother could not have afforded the cost of these activities. I have a personal motive for standing here tonight — I don't want a kid like me to fall through the cracks because of this proposal.

The Vancouver school board has done a wonderful job supporting the band and strings program. Rather than cutting it I would suggest that you expand it, and consider adding a choral component — the magical sound of children's voices has largely been silenced in many of the Vancouver schools I have visited. This should be the legacy of the VSB in these post-Olympic times.

What kind of message does this give to our children about the values of our society?

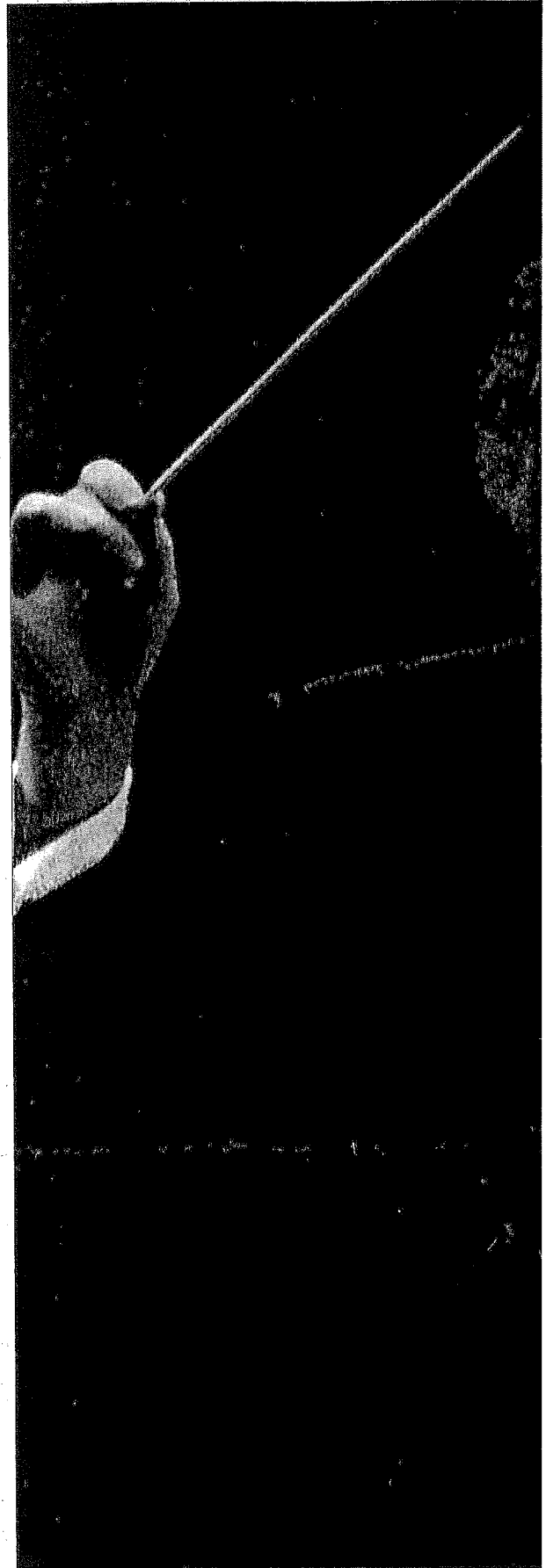
"Here's an instrument. Now give it back."

The social benefits of music are extraordinary. If a student holds a musical instrument then he or she can't hold a knife, or a joint, or a needle, or a crack pipe — or a gun.

If a student is in a choir or a band or an orchestra, they are communicating through the universal art of music at the heart of our community.

Beethoven had no choice but to live in a world of silence.

Please, do not let your choice bring silence to the world of a single child.



VSO musical director Bramwell Tovey says a child who is